



Support Mental Health & Well-being

A GUIDE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

In partnership with Caroline Poland



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A Message from Caroline Poland

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We find ourselves in a mental health crisis with students. Though COVID-19 has undoubtedly highlighted this crisis—and in some ways has heightened it—this crisis existed before the pandemic. [A recent publication of the CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) found that in 2021, 42% of high school students “experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” (in 2019, this number was 37%), and 29% experienced “poor mental health.” [A 2022 CDC Report](#) looked at data from 2013-2019, finding that “the most prevalent disorders diagnosed among US children and adolescents aged 3-17 years were attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and anxiety, each affecting approximately one in 11 (9.4%-9.8%).” All of these impact students and educators, and influences their ability to learn and work.

As schools increasingly ask more of teachers (who simultaneously must attend to students’ psychological and educational needs), it’s urgent to effectively equip educators with the tools and resources needed to manage these ever-growing issues and concerns. Ultimately, administrators support their students as they proactively and reactively create supportive and healthy work environments for educators.

This guide will offer options for administrators and educators as they build a firm foundation of mental health and well-being in the classroom by focusing on both educators and students.

Disclaimer: The information in this guide provides general information and is not meant to be specific advice to any individual situation. The information in this guide should not be taken as specific medical, psychological, legal, or mental health advice, nor should this be construed as the initiation of a therapeutic client relationship. This guide is not a substitute for mental health services or counseling.

If you or someone you are working with feels unsafe or is struggling with suicidal thoughts, please immediately call 911 or go to your nearest hospital.



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The Trauma- Informed Classroom

The Trauma-Informed Classroom

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Incorporating trauma-informed approaches into the classroom is critical given that the incidence of trauma and mental health in children (and thus within classroom settings) is significant. The [National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative reports](#) “...More than two thirds of children reported at least 1 traumatic event by age 16.” It’s important to acknowledge that the COVID-19 pandemic was a psychological trauma with cascading impacts across a child’s life. Additionally, children experience a wide range of other traumas; sadly, many children experience more than one trauma during their childhood.

THE TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH

“A ‘trauma-informed’ approach incorporates three key elements:

1. **Realizing** the prevalence of trauma
2. **Recognizing** how trauma affects all individuals involved with the program, organization, or system, including its own workforce
3. **Responding** by putting this knowledge into practice”¹

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has outlined the following principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and Transparency
- Peer Support
- Collaboration and Mutuality
- Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
- Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Building these principles into the structure of the educational organization and its classrooms takes intentional work, as these principles don’t passively get incorporated. Ideally, these principles are first modeled by the administration, with the expectation that they will be incorporated into the classroom. Through the use of these trauma-informed principles, leadership provides training and support to educators and students. In the absence of implementation by leadership, it is still critical that educators use trauma-informed approaches in their classrooms.

¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA’s working definition of trauma and principles and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; 2012.



Educators can better meet their students' needs when they understand trauma and its impacts on the life of the individual who experiences it. This includes the biology of trauma and how trauma impacts the brain. This understanding, in turn, helps inform and support a healthy learning environment where students are challenged and grow. A trauma-informed classroom promotes educators' and students' overall health and well-being!

HOW IMPLEMENTING A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM SUPPORTS MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Emotional Regulation

The ability to simultaneously regulate and manage emotions is vital to educators' and students' overall mental health and well-being. This ability to regulate is essential in the workplace or learning environment. The ability to regulate allows the prefrontal cortex to stay engaged (this is where humans' abilities to think, plan, and learn are housed). When the prefrontal cortex is engaged healthily, it protects against compassion fatigue and burnout. This prefrontal cortex engagement provides a critical foundation for learning and well-being.

Adults as Co-Regulators

Throughout the workday, administrators and educators witness the trauma and challenging situations that students face. Sometimes, knowing what to do to best support the student can feel overwhelming. By equipping educators with the tools to provide healthy co-regulation, they can model and teach this skill to students. This creates a cascade of positive impacts that students take with them in the moment and across the lifespan. Co-regulation is a wonderful gift that adults can give to students that not only impacts their emotions in the moment but also impacts them for their lifetime by supporting healthy learning!

The US Department of Health and Human Services (The Office of the Administration for Children and Families) states that “co-regulation is the interactive process by which caring adults: 1) provide warm, supportive relationships, 2) promote self-regulation through coaching, modeling, and feedback, and 3) structure supportive environments.” It’s important to note that adults are co-regulators for one another (i.e., a supervisor or administrator to a teacher) and are also healthy co-regulators for students.

Healthy co-regulation is important for many reasons, including the following:

- It settles an individual’s nervous system, pulling them out of fight-flight-freeze responses and into a more regulated and calm branch of the nervous system. This is essential for learning, imagination, and executive function/decision-making.
- It’s essential for the process of learning how to self-regulate. Within human development, individuals must have healthy co-regulation with other healthy individuals to learn how to engage in healthy self-regulation.
- It equips individuals for a lifetime of learning and growing.
- When students have a safe environment and can learn in a healthy, regulated classroom, they can more easily fulfill the learning objectives for the year.
- The ability to emotionally regulate and maintain clear thinking supports success in standardized testing.
- It promotes a sense of safety in work and school environments for educators and students.
- It supports educator retention efforts.
- It’s critical for the mental health and well-being of educators and students.



Healthy co-regulation is one of the most significant gifts a student can be given throughout the school year and is a foundational building block for all of life.

SELF-REGULATE TO BETTER CO-REGULATE WITH OTHERS

For educators (or other adults working in the educational setting) to provide healthy co-regulation to the students, they need to personally work on developing healthy self-regulation skills. By being able to self-regulate amid challenging situations in the classroom, they will be able to better offer healthy co-regulation to their students (as well as to support and protect their own mental health and well-being). This is reminiscent of the instruction given while flying: put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.

There are many ways that an educator can work on increasing their ability to self-regulate so that they can then assist others:

- **Therapy:** By working with a mental health therapist, an individual can gain understanding regarding what their personal triggers are, what skills work best for them, and determine how to integrate these skills into a variety of domains in life, including in the classroom. For educators who personally have experienced trauma, working with a specialized trauma therapist can be incredibly helpful for processing the trauma, as well as helping to increase regulation skills. A therapist can also help the educator navigate other issues related to the workplace, including compassion fatigue and burnout.
- **Identify what is safe, calming, or peaceful in the classroom:** When an individual gets anxious, overwhelmed, or triggered by something in the work environment, orienting toward safety by focusing on something in the classroom (i.e., an object, person, picture, color/pattern), can help to settle the nervous system and can be a great source of regulation. The educator who plans ahead on what these safety objects will be won't have to expend energy thinking through this when they struggle to regulate.
- **Deep inhale/hard exhale:** Deep breathing is beneficial, though sometimes it can be difficult to breathe in deeply, especially if anxious or panicking. If taking a deep inhale is difficult, focus instead on a hard exhale.
- **Maintain an open body posture:** Opening the chest helps oxygen get deeply into the lungs. This can help counteract stress hormones released when individuals move into their fight-or-flight responses. This can be achieved by focusing on broad shoulders and an open chest, which can be achieved by placing hands on the lower back or back pockets of jeans.
- **Movement of the body:** The body's ability to settle and regulate, returning to a state of calm, can be achieved when the body is in motion. Examples of ways to do this: slowly rock side to side or front to back (heels to balls of the feet), walk around the classroom, or focus on intentionally pushing feet into the ground.

The options listed above are only a few of the many techniques for self-regulation in the classroom. A therapist can assist in creating a plan and figuring out what techniques work best. Playlists on YouTube at "[Poland and Associates Consulting](#)" can assist in self-regulation for educators and students.

The Three Pillars of a Trauma-Informed Classroom

A trauma-informed classroom promotes emotional well-being, safety, and a sense of belonging—which contributes to a positive school environment and teacher retention. There are three essential pillars of a trauma-informed classroom: emotional regulation, safety, and connection. These pillars are crucial in creating an environment where students can thrive, feel secure, and engage in effective learning.

PILLAR ONE: EMOTIONAL REGULATION

Emotional regulation is the cornerstone of mental health, well-being, and positive classroom behavior. Emotional regulation is essential for optimal learning outcomes, and it acts as a protective barrier against issues like test anxiety.

Activities to help students regulate in the classroom:

- ☐ Identify a “safety anchor”
- ☐ Place your hand over your heart
- ☐ Hands behind your back or sitting with your palms up
- ☐ Pull up on the seat of your chair or push down on the arms of your chair while seated
- ☐ Jump side-to-side
- ☐ Focus on your feet on the ground (“grow roots”)
- ☐ Deep breathing
- ☐ If an inhale feels triggering or “doesn’t work”, focus on a hard exhale instead (a long sigh)

Activities for proprioceptive input:

- ☐ Animal walks
- ☐ Chewing
- ☐ Carrying something heavy
- ☐ Wall push or push-up
- ☐ Pull up or push down on a chair
- ☐ Jumping
- ☐ Blowing bubbles
- ☐ Weighted blanket or vest
- ☐ Squeezing own arms or body
- ☐ Cleaning or organizing in the classroom
- ☐ Grounding kits
- ☐ Sensory materials: Velcro under desks, pom poms, scrubbies
- ☐ Alternative seating options

PILLAR TWO: SAFETY

Safety, both physical and psychological, is paramount in a trauma-informed classroom. “Safety” means no physical or psychological harm is occurring, whereas “felt safety” refers to feeling a sense of safety in our environment and with those around us. For felt safety to occur, an individual needs to know and believe that they are safe. When students feel safe, they move out of their survival responses (fight-flight-freeze-fawn) and are better able to learn and make decisions.

Four tools to support felt safety in the classroom (as stated by Trust Based Relational Intervention):

- ☐ Predictability
- ☐ Routines
- ☐ Rituals
- ☐ Transitions

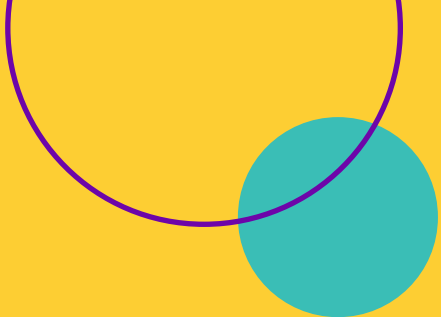
PILLAR THREE: CONNECTION

Connection is a fundamental human need and a cornerstone of effective teaching. Utilize practical techniques, such as undivided attention, warm greetings, and fostering a sense of connectedness between teachers and students. A student's perception of social connectedness can significantly impact their mental health and overall well-being. The CDC put out an [excellent report on this topic](#).

“The best way to take care of others is to take care of yourself first.”

– CAROLINE POLAND





Strategies for Enhancing Wellness in Educational Settings

Strategies for Enhancing Wellness in Educational Settings

Wellness is comprised of the presence of positive components in life and should not be viewed simply as the absence of disease. Wellness and health are a significant factor when it comes to retention of teachers. It's essential to recognize unhealthy situations and work on fixing these or mitigating their impacts where possible. It's also crucial to work on increasing the positive and healthy aspects of classrooms and workplaces to maintain overall wellness.

WELLNESS FOR EDUCATORS

When school administrators prioritize educator mental health and wellness, classroom satisfaction and learning are enhanced. This must be done in words and action by incorporating this into the school policies and procedures and the organization's structure. Overall, classroom success is an outflow of well-written policies and procedures that are put into action.

Here are a few examples of ways administrators can enhance well-being and mental health support for their educators:

- Implement a trauma-informed approach for the personal well-being of the educator.
- Help to minimize burnout: Provide educators with the necessary resources to meet the demands of work. Burnout is more likely to occur if the balance between demands and resources is unbalanced.
- Be clear on what constitutes gender harassment and be clear in all policies: [A Pew Research Center Survey in 2018](#) reports that “Seven-in-ten women with a bachelor’s degree or more...say they have been sexually harassed”. Clearly written and understood workplace policies defining what gender/sexual harassment is, as well as defining consequences that will occur when they aren’t followed, are necessary. When communicated and implemented thoroughly for all employees, the well-being and health of educators is protected and supported.
- Support educators when there are potentially dangerous or inappropriate situations within the classroom.



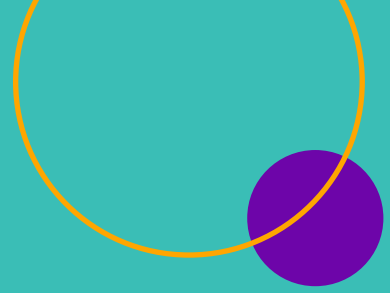
- Provide a stipend for mental health counseling.
- Allow educators to be human by demonstrating an understanding that it is important that they have a life outside of work, with the goal of healthy work-life harmonization.
- Build margin into daily routine to allow adequate time for prep work, connecting to other resources and educators in the building, and even appropriate breaks for meal time.
- Increase opportunities to give educators autonomy and empowerment in their areas (avoid micro-managing).
- Be proactive in listening to understand how their job impacts them, what is challenging, and how the administration can support them.

WELLNESS FOR STUDENTS

Support social connectedness: In [a study published in 2022](#) that examined students' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers found that "students who felt close to persons at school had a significantly lower prevalence of poor mental health during the pandemic... [and lower] persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, having seriously considered attempting suicide, and having attempted suicide." Helping to support students in building a felt experience of connectedness with their peers and providing a sense of connection between educator and student is an important way of supporting well-being and providing a buffer towards mental health concerns.

Here are a few examples of ways teachers and administrators can enhance well-being and mental health support for students:

- Implement a trauma-informed approach to classroom teaching.
- Build emotional regulation strategies into the classroom and structure of the day. Determine a plan of approach when recognizing a moment when students have become emotionally dysregulated.
- Ensure classrooms are physically and psychologically safe for all students.
- Connect students to the school counselor where appropriate.
- Understand that learning, play, and a felt sense of safety are interconnected, and people of all ages learn well when play or fun is incorporated.
- Implement regular opportunities for students to move their bodies physically. Providing opportunities for movement allows the individual to regulate and the brain to organize itself well, which is vital for well-being and learning.
- When significant events occur in the community or nationally (i.e., a hurricane, a school shooting, September 11th), additional support and care should be put into the school day.



Creating an Emotional Regulation Plan

Creating an Emotional Regulation Plan

Incorporating emotional regulation into the classroom proactively is incredibly helpful to students' overall well-being by improving their ability to learn and stay focused.

Be prepared and have a plan.

A proactive plan for emotional regulation in the classroom helps improve success for classroom outcomes. Implement a reactive plan when students need it, too—just as lesson plans are essential to guide the day, an emotional plan is also crucial. Figuring out the rhythm of incorporating these emotional regulation skills into the day is vital for supporting overall health and well-being, as well as helping to support a felt sense of safety in the classroom. In this section, you'll find the elements of a proactive plan and fillable worksheets for student and educator plans.

PROACTIVE PLAN FOR STUDENT EMOTIONAL REGULATION

1. Teach a new emotional regulation skill to students every week or two.
2. Schedule a time daily to review previously learned skills. When developmentally appropriate, have students lead the class in the skill. By teaching, the student will incorporate the material at a deeper level into their own lives.
3. Evaluate lesson plans/schedule to determine the moments that are more likely to be triggering (i.e. speeches, tests, holidays or events that might trigger students such as an assignment or field trip).
4. Once a potentially triggering moment is determined, add a reminder into the lesson plan to intentionally incorporate emotional regulation skills.
5. Knowledge is power! Teach students about their fight, flight, freeze responses and how this might impact them in the classroom.
6. Set up a station in the classroom where students can go to move, breathe, and regulate.
7. Provide sensory grounding kits in the classroom for students to have easy access to objects that might help them regulate or settle their nervous system.
8. Empower students to utilize skills and ask for help when needed.

Plan for Student Emotional Regulation

Name of Student: _____

What situations are triggering to this student? (i.e. dates, seasons, intensity of voices, words/phrases, news events)

Signs/symptoms that student is becoming dysregulated: (examples might include: staring off/disengaging, fidgeting, stomping, getting anxious or angry)

What words and phrases are needed when the student has become dysregulated:

Interventions and emotional regulation techniques that are helpful for this student:

(remember: different forms of dysregulation might need different techniques. Write down different forms of dysregulation you have witnessed and interventions for each of these that you know work)

Ways I can co-regulate with the student to help hold emotions and model emotional regulation:

Plan for Educator Emotional Regulation

What situations are triggering to me? (i.e. dates, seasons, intensity of voices, words/phrases, news events)

What are signs that I am beginning to get emotionally dysregulated? (consider the following categories: thoughts, feelings, actions/reactions, body sensations)

What emotional regulation strategies can I build into my workday to proactively regulate myself so I don't need to wait until I am dysregulated?

How can I pair these proactive strategies with something else that I regularly do? What reminders can I utilize so I don't have to remember to regulate on my own? (i.e. calendar notifications to pop up on your phone, computer, or watch, pairing looking at a specific object with a specific exercise to condition yourself to regulate each time you look at that object)

PLAN FOR EDUCATOR EMOTIONAL REGULATION – CONTINUED

What regulation strategies can I utilize when I am emotionally dysregulated and students are in the classroom? (Remember: you can utilize regulation strategies individually or incorporate them with your students)

What regulation strategies can I utilize when I am emotionally dysregulated and students are not in the classroom with me/at times when I am alone at school?

Who are my support people that I can reach out to when I am struggling as a means of co-regulation?

What “outside of school” resources can I incorporate to better support my mental health and wellbeing? (i.e. more sleep, intentional body movement, time in nature, therapy)



More Resources

More Resources

Building a trauma-informed classroom requires intentional effort and collaboration between educators and administrators. By modeling these principles and providing the necessary training and support, you can cultivate a school environment that promotes resilience and success in the classroom and throughout life.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT YOU:

- [SchoolSafety.gov Mental Health Resources](#)
- [CDC Children's Mental Health](#)
- [CDC Mental Health](#)
- [School Connectedness](#)
- [Teen Mental Health](#)
- [Resources for Coping After Emergencies](#)
- [School-Based Physical Activity Improves the Social and Emotional Climate for Learning](#)
- [School Nutrition and the Social and Emotional Climate and Learning](#)

If you or a student is feeling unsafe or struggling with suicidal thoughts, please immediately call 911 or go to your nearest hospital.

Support Your Students' Mental Health and Well-being

In this free recorded webinar with Caroline Poland, delve into the principles of a trauma-informed classroom and empower your school's teachers to foster a safe and supportive environment where students can flourish.

WATCH IT FREE HERE ►



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